



**FOR RELEASE On: January 22, 2020**

**Colchester, Vermont**

### **Town of Colchester Selectboard Announces Town-wide Fire Department**

The Town of Colchester Selectboard has created a Town-wide Fire Department which will begin service on July 1, 2020. This department will bring together the three organizations that currently provide fire protection services to the Town of Colchester: Colchester Center Volunteer Fire Company, Malletts Bay Fire Department, and Saint Michael's College Fire and Rescue. Fire protection expenses, for vehicles, equipment, buildings, and volunteer stipends has been and will continue to be paid for with funding from Town of Colchester property taxes. Between the three departments there are nearly 90 volunteers; it is our hope and intention that all volunteers will remain active in our town-wide department.

The Colchester Selectboard initiated this consolidation in the spring of 2019. This service is being planned and budgeted for with a combination of professional firefighters, both volunteer and career. We will continue to recruit, train, call up and importantly, honor the nearly 90 current volunteers, as well as past contributors who have provided seventy years of fire coverage in Colchester. This change will bring together our current three fire departments' staff and four stations under a single command as a Town department. The Town will continue to support Saint Michael's Fire financially and we will incorporate them into the town-wide command structure.

During recent budget cycles, the fire chiefs from Colchester Center and Malletts Bay asked the Town Selectboard to add paid firefighters during weekday daytime when we have inadequate coverage to respond to a structure fire. This is a dangerous situation and it needs to be rectified. Adding paid staff made more sense to the Selectboard under a consolidated approach.

Prior to this effort, in 2012, the Colchester Heritage Project recommended considering the advantages of consolidating fire serves. The Colchester Governance Committee in 2014 noted that fire budgets were developed independently and the Town was billed for services through separate contracts making oversight, coordination of capital expenses and cost control difficult. Two options in a 2014 Governance Committee report on fire districts included merging fire districts under a single prudential committee or combining into the Town.

In March 2019, the Selectboard provided Fire Districts #2 and #3 with two options to continue receiving Town funding for fire services: 1) merge departments with a single chief and a single fire district board, or 2) transfer fire services to the Town. The fire district prudential committees (boards) of Fire Districts #2 and #3 approved motions to work with the Town on the transfer option last summer. We have also been working with the fire chiefs on the town-wide department. The Prudential Committees have approved and executed agreements transferring the responsibilities and assets for fire services to the Town effective July 1, 2020.

Selectboard member Herb Downing acknowledged his appreciation for the two volunteer departments beginning fire services in the early 50's in the two separate population centers, the Bay and the Village. In 1951, the Town levied a town-wide property tax for fire protection and made 1% of total taxes available to each Malletts Bay and Colchester Center Fire. From 1951 to 2020, annual contracted fire expenses rose from 2% of total property taxes to 9.5%, making it the third largest of 25 service groups in Town government with expenses of \$1,009,651. Herb added, "While separate fire departments made sense in 1951, since then Colchester has grown together; we owe it to our citizens to consolidate our fire service to provide better coverage and to assure we are making the best use of precious taxpayer resources."

Selectboard member Pamela Loranger explained, "I am pleased to help put into place recommendations of the Heritage Project and the Governance Committee to provide fire protection more efficiently and effectively to the taxpayers, residences and businesses of Colchester."

Colchester Selectboard Vice-Chair Tom Mulcahy explained, "We appreciate that the Prudential Committees of Colchester Fire District #2 and Colchester Fire District #3 understood the logic in creating a single Town-wide department to address the dangerous deficits in fire response. Selectboard Clerk Jacqueline Murphy noted, "Just as with Colchester Rescue, a combined career and volunteer service, we will maintain a strong volunteer presence in firefighting and honor past individual and departmental contributions as we move forward together."

The Selectboard will provide an update on the town-wide fire protection changes on Tuesday January 28<sup>th</sup> at Colchester Town Hall, 781 Blakely Road at their regular Selectboard meeting which begins at 6:30PM

Contact Information: Jeffrey D Bartley, Colchester Selectboard Chair, [JBartley@colchestervt.gov](mailto:JBartley@colchestervt.gov) 802-503-5801

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